DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 275 004 CS 210 137

AUTHOR Balajthy, Ernest
TITLE Process Writing in the Intermediate Grades: Magical Panacea or Oversold Cliche?
PUB DATE Aug 86
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Conference on Language and Literacy (Geneseo, NY, August 11-15, 1986).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Content Area Writing; *Educational Philosophy; Educational Theories; Elementary School Teachers; Intermediate Grades; Learning Processes; Reading Writing Relationship; Student Evaluation; Student Needs; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Teacher Researchers; *Whole Language Approach

ABSTRACT

Noting that the principles of writing process instruction typically offered to elementary teachers are less readily adaptable to intermediate classrooms emphasizing content area learning rather than basic skills, this paper explores two key themes important to the successful implementation of writing process instruction: (1) teachers' needs to understand clearly the philosophies and theories underlying writing process approaches, and (2) teachers' needs to assume the role of researcher in their classrooms to understand their students' writing needs and to determine how their strategies meet or fail to meet those needs. The paper first describes the concepts underlying the "whole language approach" and then examines some of the problems facing intermediate grade teachers as they teach the writing process in their classes. These problems are: the need to broaden children's perspectives on different kinds of writing, the need to integrate writing with content area learning, and the need to become researchers in the classroom. To elaborate on the teacher as researcher, the paper outlines the developmental writing needs of intermediate grade students, and how writing can aid in identity building. Finally, the paper discusses the importance of a theoretical understanding of the underpinnings of whole language, as opposed to simple implementation of prescribed techniques. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

PROCESS WRITING IN THE INTERMEDIATE GRADES:

MAGICAL PANACEA OR OVERSOLD CLICHE'?

Ernest Balajthy

Dept. of Elementary & Secondary

Education & Reading

State University of New York

at Geneseo

Geneseo, NY 14454

(o) 716-245-5259/5558

(r) 716-243-1483

ED275004

Paper presented at the Conference on Language and Literacy, Sponsored by the Genesee Valley Developmental Literacy Support Group and the State University of New York at Geneseo, August 11-15, 1986, Geneseo, NY.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Ernest Balajthy

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 210 137

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PROCESS WRITING IN THE INTERMEDIATE GRADES:

MAGICAL PANACEA OR OVERSOLD CLICHE'?

Intermediate grade teachers who favor writing process approaches face a variety of unique problems. Principles of writing process instruction typically offered to elementary teachers are less readily adaptible to the context of classrooms where concern for basic skill development has given way to concern for content area learning.

While there are a variety of practical ideas which serve to help intermediate teachers use writing process in their classrooms, two key themes are of preeminent importance to successful implementation of writing process. First, teachers need to clearly understand the basic philosophy and theory underlying writing process approaches. Only with this foundational understanding can they make decisions to use specific strategies in their classrooms. Second, teachers need to assume the role of "researcher" in their classroom to successfully understand the writing needs of their students and to determine how their strategies meet or fail to meet those needs.

The purpose of this article is to, first, describe the concepts underlying a "whole language" approach. The bulk of the article will include a discussion of problems and possible solutions facing the intermediate grade teacher as he or she tries to use the writing process in class. A final section will deal with the importance of a theoretical understanding of the underpinnings of whole language, as opposed to simple

implementation of prescribed techniques.

What is "Whole Language"?

The whole language classroom typically contains some or all of the following:

Journal writing
Teachers belong to a support group
Daily reading and writing by children and teacher
Interaction among children and teacher
A classroom library
"Writing process" techniques

In a 1981 article designed to lay the basis for his approach to whole language in the classroom, Frank Smith described the teacher's choice as between people and programs. That is, teachers accede control of their curriculum to either the publishing companies and curriculum development agencies, or, in the whole language approach, they and their children seize control of their own classrooms, choosing people over programs. Rather than targeting the learning of an objective dictated by forces outside the classroom, teachers use their own judgment to choose methods and materials to fit the needs of their children.

Smith goes on to describe the whole language curriculum as based on three principles: Demonstrations, engagement, and sensitivity. The teacher is actively involved in the same language arts activities as the children, acting to demonstrate a variety of possible literacy activities. Children also demonstrate for one another, sharing concerns and advice. Children are actively engaged in literacy as they read, write, and interact on a daily basis. Both teacher and children develop

a sensitivity to the needs of others, in large measure developing skills through their interactions and evaluations.

Whole language, in a sense then, is a state of mind in teachers and in children. As noted above, there are a variety of characteristic methods and materials in the whole language classroom, but these characteristics do not, in and of themselves, constitute whole language. Rich (1985) has noted that teachers may well use any or all of the strategies, but if their underlying philosophy of education is not child-centered, the classroom will not be whole language.

Problems Facing the Intermediate Grade Teacher

A brief search of the literature on whole language and writing process applications yields surprisingly little of help for teachers of older students. The focus of attention has been placed on elementary grade youngsters. Teachers of students in the intermediate grades face a variety of problems unique to their own situation, problems which often are simply made worse by an uncritical application of techniques designed for elementary classrooms.

The Need to Broaden Children's Perspectives

Intermediate grade teachers recognize the need to broaden their children's perspectives on the different kinds of writing. Writing process advocates such as Graves (1983) and Calkins (1986) advocate too narrow a range of written composition, emphasizing personal experience stories to the exclusion of other

forms. Purves and Purves (1986), noting that Emig's (1971) formative work was titled "The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders" (italics supplied), argue that there is no single writing process, but rather that there are many writing activities, different writers writing in different contexts.

The commonly accepted writing process approach limits itself to personal experience stories for several valid reasons. Students more easily recognize the personal relevance of writing. They write from a knowledgeable stance and can more easily develop a natural "voice", having experienced the events about which they are writing. By expressing the important events of their lives, students are brought to a better understanding of self and of the meaning of their world. Personal experience stories also lend themselves to peer conferencing, as other students have often had similar experiences and can draw on their own background knowledge to provide feedback to the writers.

The intermediate grades, however, can be an effective time to introduce students to other forms of writing. Too narrow a definition of the "writing process" has been promulgated in the name of personal relevance. As Moffett (1983) has suggested, children benefit from exposure to and experience with a variety of modes of communication. Basing his arguments on Piagetian conceptualizations about cognitive growth, Moffett indirectly admits that the personal experience story emphasis in the elementary grades may be appropriate due to younger children's initial egocentricity. But as children grow older, they decenter and are capable of functioning at increasingly adult levels.

Moffett's "universe of discourse" concepts suggest that a wide variety of discourse types can be used with children while maintaining a holistic basis within the classroom. He suggests a balanced curriculum which includes each of the types of discourse within his listing. The intermediate grades are an appropriate time to begin helping children to deal with other forms of writing and reading.

Interior dialogue (egocentric speech)

Vocal dialogue (socialized speech)

Correspondence

Personal journal

Autobiography

Memoir

Biography

Chronicle

History

Science

Metaphysics

The Need to "Write to Learn"

Emig (1977) first focused attention on the usefulness of writing as a tool to encourage content area thinking and learning. In the past few years, recognition of the power of writing as a generative learning tool--one which involves students in generating their own meaning from textual material--has vastly increased (Vacca & Vacca, 1986).

Both the act and the product of writing increase learning

(Emig, 1983), and a wide variety of strategies have been demonstrated to improve content area learning, though few teachers have as yet begun to capitalize on this powerful tool. Instruction in summarization, for example, has resulted in improvement in retention of social studies material (Weisberg & Balajthy, 1985).

The usefulness of integrating writing and content area learning is recognized by students, as well. Langer (1986b), for example, has noted that, "Literacy skills are best learned when students are engaged in functional activities they are pursuing with purposeful intentions" (p. 117).

The Need for Teachers to be Researchers

If teachers are to be freed from the domination of outside curricular controls, they must first learn to function independently. Without a step-by-step, "teacher-proof" guide to follow, teachers must recognize and respond to their students' needs and progress (or lack of progress). In the past, this capability has often been described as "diagnostic" in nature, but the rejection of the "find what's wrong and fix it" models of reading and writing instruction has led to this term's fall into disfavor among holists. Herber (1978) described content area teachers who were flexible enough to meet students' needs rather than blindly following a standard curriculum as "prescriptive," (as opposed to "assumptive") but again this term implies a "medical" model of subskill diagnosis and prescription.

Whole language advocates have turned instead to the model of teacher as informal researcher. The National Council of Teachers of English has encouraged teachers to assume this role and has provided financial backing of such efforts. Donlan (1986), in one of a regular series of columns on "Classroom Inquiry" in English Journal, has described how an informal experimental design can be easily constructed to investigate the effectiveness of techniques. More frequently, teachers engage in an observational form of research to gain insight into student performance and development, letting children become the teachers of how they learn.

An insightful awareness of children's development is crucial at the intermediate grade level if teachers wish to free themselves from a reliance on standardized curricular programming and formal assessment. Without such an understanding on the part of the teacher, instruction becomes fragmented and disorganized. Past attempts to implement holistic models of instruction within reading and language arts classrooms have failed to maintain long-term success, despite initial enthusiasm and popularity, largely due to a fragmented overall curriculum structure. Barbe and Abbott's (1975) Personalized Reading and Allen's (1976) Language Experience for Communication were attempts to provide a unifying scope and sequence to the individualized reading and language experience movements respectively. Both attempts were carried out too late to rescue these movements from oblivion. Today, both individualized reading and language experience are viewed simply as supplemental activities rather than as central focuses for language arts curriculum.

If the individual teacher must play the central role in facilitating learning experiences based on the observational attitude of a researcher, that teacher must be committed to the whole language approach. Writing process and other whole language curricula cannot be implemented through a top-down process, forced upon teachers by an administration which is "sold" on the ideas. Such an approach to curriculum change will inevitably lead to a perversion of holistic ideals, as the teacher once again is forced to consider himself or herself as merely a technician administering a preset curriculum.

The responsibilities and attitudes involved in being a teacher-researcher place particularly great demands on teachers. Swanson-Owens (1986) has noted that top-down implementation of writing process can lead to a great deal of resistance on the part of teachers. She notes that many school reform efforts have been doomed by an anti-teacher bias on the part of administrators and educational leaders. The reforms

> are implemented--and evaluated--according to timetables that overlook teachers' ways of responding to and assimilating changes, because the changes these reforms involve seem irrelevant to teachers and because their costs outweigh their benefits for teachers (p. 71).

Research on teacher reform indicates that teachers do not act as simple technicians during curriculum change. They actively filter innovations through a complex meaning system based on their conceptualizations about the purpose and procedure of education (Olson, 1980; Elbaz, 1981). Commitment to a reform on the part of most teachers does not occur until <u>after</u> the reform has proven itself effective--just that time when administrators

are withdrawing support teachers need during such changes and are turning their attention to some new matter.

Development of the teacher-as-researcher perspective is particularly important for intermediate grade teachers. The developmental writing process is at a complex stage, with many important changes taking place in children's capabilities. Teachers need to recognize where different children fit into the various aspects of developmental process typical to these age levels if their research is to be carried out within a meaningful framework.

Developmental Writing Needs of Intermediate Students

1. Children are developing increased independence. Peer and teacher conferences require a good deal less time than in earlier years as they begin to acquire the ability to stand outside their own writing for evaluation purposes. A simple word or two is often enough to help students reconsider their writings, using the teacher-directed processes of the earlier years as the basis for their own developing analytical repertoire. Vygotsky (1962) has noted that, "What a child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow" (p. 101).

2. Children are developing an intuitive feeling about what is effective or ineffective. They can conclude, "It sounds right" or "It sounds wrong" without necessarily appealing to some rule or guideline about good writing. While this intuition might seem automatic, it is based on years of experience with reading

and on years of detailed feedback on their writing from teachers and peers.

3. Calkins (1986) notes that the operations of the writing process become largely internalized with intermediate grade youngsters. Children seem "a little more capable of thinking through their options" (p. 94). Operations which once had to be carried out concretely--such as physically writing several optional drafts of a lead sentence--now can be carried out in the mind.

4. Intermediate grade children develop the ability to take on different roles as they write, to pretend they are somebody else. This skill of "voice" involves the complexity of distancing one's point of view from oneself. The egocentricity of younger children makes such a task particularly difficult. Older children can pretend they are explorers in Asia or pioneers in the Old West and write from those points of view.

5. Children in the intermediate grades first begin to display evidence of the ability to deal with "multiple viewpoints," one of the later stages in Chall's (1983) description of reading development. Erikson (1963) has called this ability "mutual interpersonal perspective taking." That is, younger children assume that there are absolute rules in writing. Events must be described exactly as they occurred, whether or not there are components that are tangential to the basic plot. Stories must be neatly ended, with a statement such as "And they lived happily ever after" or "And we arrived back at our house after the vacation and I started school."

Older children recognize that the same event can be told in

a variety of ways to suit different audiences. Perhaps some aspects of the event can be emphasized beyond historical accuracy in order to make a point. Other parts might be skipped.

The Need for Identity Building

As students approach early adolescence, writing can act as an aid for identity building. Erikson (1968) has indicated that the formation of self identity is the crucial developmental task of the adolescent years. One forms one's identity through interaction with one's peers, parents, teachers, and others. The resulting feedback is intensely confusing, generating a great deal of psychological stress as a characteristic feature of adolescence. The adolescent is trying to construct a unified picture of self from the disunified, confused reflected images from a broken mirror.

Writing can serve as a potentially valuable medium of unification for this crisis. By putting experiences and feelings in print, one can sort out some sense of meaning from the confusion. When preadolescents feel that teachers and peers are a supportive community, they may deal with very personal topics in their classroom writings. Such personal writing will more frequently be a private medium of self-discovery, as in writing personal memoirs for the diary, if students have found it to be a valuable public form through classroom experience.

Many preadolescents will dismiss writing as a potentially valuable means of finding identity. They may choose impersonal,

unimportant topics. They may complain of boredom. Many of these complaints, however, simply mask the underlying worries and confusion.

The Importance of Theory

As we ask ourselves the question, "What can we do to use whole language in our classrooms?" we need to first recognize that, in Langer's (1986a) words, the question must be rephrased to "'Why' rather than 'What'." While there are many practical ideas for classroom practice available from whole language activists, an inappropriate theory underlying our practice will subvert holistic goals. Holistic instruction, rather than being a prescribed set of classroom practices, is instead a way of thinking about children, learning, and instruction that helps teachers make judgments about the "how" and "what" of the classroom.

A failure to recognize the key importance of theory may be largely responsible for the national failure to reform writing education. The key findings of the new writing process school of thought are hardly new. Many of the ideas simply echo what was known during the years of progressive education and during the Project English centers of the 1960's. A failure to emphasize the "why" of curriculum reform (and its corollary, an emphasis on the "how") led to a failure of the reform movements.

Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1984) rhetorically ask whether schools are misguided in their efforts "to get written language learners to write like Palmer, spell like Horn, and use grammar

like Warriner" (p. xii). While they (and we) might define the goals of language arts as exploration and expansion of communication potential specifically and of human potential generally, until the nation as a whole is convinced of the validity of such a definition, attempts to change classroom practice will be only windowdressing.

The crucial problem in attempting to impose practice without first convincing people of the accompanying theory is the problem of transfer. Walk into almost any classroom in the nation and you will observe writing teachers teaching "the writing process" or "language experience." But a closer examination almost inevitably reveals that the techniques are being applied in a formulaic fashion that has nothing to do with a classroom based in whole language. Simple transfer of successful holistic techniques from one school to the next without the underlying principles is to court guaranteed failure.

Readers of the popular texts on writing process such as Graves (1983) Writing: Teachers and Children at Work and Calkins (1983) Lessons from a Child are often incensed by the authors' styles. Rather than finding a step-by-step manual of instructions as in the typical textbook, they find personal narratives that detail experiences in real classrooms with real children. The purpose of these texts would seem to be to let readers into the authors' minds, to help readers share the authors' understanding of experiences. In a sense, the books are exercises in creative writing rather than revelations of proposition Truth. We see the writing process approach through

the actions and words of teachers and students, rather than by explicit descriptions of "how-to-do-it."

Of course, theory without practice is dead. We need the explicit propositional truth of Proverbs and of St. Paul. Without them, we might see no practical application of the inspirational poetry of David or the lifestyle and cryptic sayings of Jesus. We need the step-by-step approaches to the writing process, or else the exhortations to bring meaning to children's lives through reading and writing would have no application to our classrooms.

Assimilation of holistic theory is of particular importance to teachers of intermediate grade and preadolescent youngsters. In almost all instances of actual instructional practice, there is very little difference between traditional approaches to writing and the writing process approach. (One important exception is in the reliance on subskill drillwork in traditional approaches.) But while practice might be similar, the principles of interaction and motivation under which teachers and students are operating are radically opposed.

REFERENCES

Allen, Roach Van. Language Experiences in Communication. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976.

Barbe, Walter B., & Jerry L. Abbott. Personalized Reading Instruction. West Nyack, NY: 1975.

Calkins, Lucy McCormick. Lessons from a Child. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books, 1983.

Calkins, Lucy McCormick. The Art of Teaching Writing. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books, 1986.

Chall, Jeanne S. Stages of Reading Development. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983.

Donlan, Dan. "Classroom Inquiry: Using an Experimental Design--Just the Thing for That Rainy Day." English Journal, vol. 75 (March 1986), pp. 113-115.

Elbaz, Freema. "The Teacher's 'Practical Knowledge': Report of a Case Study." Curriculum Inquiry, vol. 11 (Spring 1981), pp. 43-71.

Emig, Janet. The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971.

Emig, Janet. "Writing as a Mode of Learning." College Composition and Communication, vol. 28 (May 1977), pp. 122-128.

Emig, Janet. The Web of Meaning: Essays on Writing, Teaching, Learning, and Thinking. Upper Montclair, N.J.: Boynton, Cook, 1983.

Erikson, Erik H. Childhood and Society, 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1963.

Erikson, Erik H. Identity, Youth and Crisis. New York: Norton, 1968.

Graves, Donald H. Writing: Teachers and Children at Work. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books, 1983.

Harste, Jerome C., Virginia A. Woodward, and Carolyn L. Burke. Language Stories & Literacy Lessons. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books, 1984.

Herber, Harold L. Teaching Reading in Content Areas, 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978.

Langer, Judith A. "'Why' Rather Than 'What'!" Research in the Teaching of English, vol. 20 (February 1986a), pp. 490-94.

Langer, Judith A. "Musings...Computers and Conversation." Research in the Teaching of English, vol. 20 (May 1986b), pp. 117-119.

Moffett, James. Teaching the Universe of Discourse. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983.

Olson, J. K. "Teacher Constructs and Curriculum Change." Journal of Curriculum Studies, vol. 12 (January-March 1980), pp. 1-12.

Purves, Alan C., and William C. Purves. "Viewpoints: Cultures, Text Models, and the Activity of Writing." Research in the Teaching of English, vol. 20 (May 1986): pp.174-197.

Rich, Sharon J. "Restoring Power to Teachers: The Impact of 'Whole Language'." Language Arts, vol. 62 (November 1985), pp. 717-724.

Smith, Frank. "Demonstrations, Engagement and Sensitivity: The Choice Between People and Programs." Language Arts, vol. 58 (September 1981), pp. 634-642.

Swanson-Owens, Deborah. "Identifying natural sources of resistance: A case study of implementing writing across the curriculum." Research in the Teaching of English, vol. 20 (February 1986), pp. 69-97

Vacca, Richard T., & Vacca, JoAnne L. Content Area Reading (2nd ed.). Boston: Little, Brown, 1986.

Weisberg, Renee, and Ernest Balajthy. "Teaching Disabled Readers Metacognitive Learning Strategies for Summarizing and Test-taking." Paper presented at College Reading Association, Pittsburgh, PA, October, 1985.

Vygotsky, Lev Semenovich. Thought and Language. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1962.